SURPRISE
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Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19
Genesis 18:1–15
Genesis 21:1–7

"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"
Genesis 18:14 (NRSV)

The earliest Christian gospel may be stated . . . in the following manner:
"Look! Attend! Listen! A child is born, a new being, a new era,
a new existential possibility has emerged. Novelty has entered history,
and therefore you are free of the binding illusion that your fate
is written in the stars. The ground out of which history springs
is alive and gracious: therefore anything is possible. Live in openness,
wonder, and gratitude, accepting the mysterious gift of the ability
to create, act, and forgive!" This gospel pointed out and gave status to
a new manner of being in the world that became visible in the person of
Jesus.
Its miraculous character was the new world it created for believers,
the total reorientation, the conversion it effected.

Sam Keen
Apology for Wonder

Startle us, O God, with your truth and your lively, life-giving presence. Come out of the nowhere into the here and now—this day, this morning, this time together. Touch our hearts with your grace; strengthen our spirits with your love in Jesus Christ, which comes to us in surprising ways. In his holy name we pray. Amen.

The trouble with a lot of religion is that it is so predictable; there is no room for surprise in it.

Sam Keen, a theologian-philosopher and a very creative thinker, has written about the absence of surprise and wonder from most conventional religion and from life itself. Keen thinks surprise—and wonder—are at the heart of religion.

In one of his books he remembers an incident that always makes me smile, because I can remember it too. He's sitting in Mrs. Jones' elementary school classroom practicing what used to be called penmanship.

> Mrs. Jones' classroom always seemed dark, but on this particular day it was more depressing than usual. For an eternal afternoon I sat practicing my penmanship exercises, listening to Mrs. Jones' monotonous: "Make your 'i's' come all the way up to the middle line. And don't forget to make your 'o's' nice and round. Circle. Circle. Circle. Period. Now repeat." Caught somewhere between boredom and despair I struggled against tears and settled in to wait for the resurrection—the 3:00 bell.
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> And then it happened. A movement in a tree outside the window caught my eye, and there, in the sweet and redeeming light of the springtime world, was a summer warbler building a nest. Caught in wonder, I followed the progress of the nest construction. . . . My "i's" and "o's" were forgotten until Mrs. Jones materialized over my shoulder and demanded to know why three lines in my penmanship book were empty. Instinct warned me that no serendipitous warbler could provide an excuse for the neglect of my educational duties. So I bit my tongue, cherished my wonder in silence, and stayed in after school to make up my lessons.

"Mrs. Jones won more than the day," Keen says. "Schooling became a habit for me, and I remained in the classroom for twenty-five years and five degrees without seriously questioning the maxim that private enthusiasm must be divorced from the educational task" (*To a Dancing God: Education for Serendipity*, pp. 38–39).

Sam Keen went on to write some important theology. In *Apology for Wonder,* he argues that the experience of wonder is at the heart of all true religion and all true education, that there is altogether too little of it in our churches and schools. Both religion and education, he says, strive to make everything predictable, conventional, certain, nailed down—that is to say, to eliminate the possibility of surprise, unpredictability, novelty, mystery.

The Bible, on the other hand, is full of surprises. In fact, one of the oldest stories in the Bible, the story that is the foundation of the entire structure, is a story about a surprise, a big surprise.

It's a common story about a married couple, Abraham and Sarah, who are getting on in years. Now we are learning to be careful about our vocabulary when it comes to this topic, a matter about which I am increasingly sensitive. But there is no more accurate way to say it than they're old. They're at the time of life when, to put it delicately, you don't make long-

range plans. It's time to downsize, sell the house, get rid of your stuff, and move to the Presbyterian Home. It's not a time to launch an adventure, start something new. As a matter of fact, the last thing in the world you would contemplate, the most outrageous thought you could think, is a pregnancy, a baby.

They are nomads. They own some sheep and goats. They move around a lot, to provide grazing for the flocks. Years and years ago, there was that business about God wanting them to move, to start a new life in a new place. And there was the matter of the promise: "I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you." Or at least that's what Abraham said God said. They don't talk about it any longer. It's much too painful. No children ever came.

Now they are old. They don't talk about the promise anymore. If truth were told, they have forgotten about it.

And then one day three strangers appear in the heat of midday. Abraham is sitting in the shade at the opening of his tent. Sarah is inside. According to nomadic custom, Abraham welcomes the strangers, offers hospitality, asks Sarah to prepare a meal.

"By the way, where is Sarah?" one of the strangers asks. He knows her name. It's the Lord. God says, "I'll return and when I do you'll have a baby." Talk about surprise! Sarah, inside the tent, preparing the food, is listening in. When the stranger gets to the part about her having a baby, she can't contain herself. She laughs. So like a man to be talking so confidently, so nonsensically, about a matter he obviously doesn't understand at all. She laughs out loud at the absurdity. The stranger—God—hears the laughter and asks, "Why is Sarah laughing? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Sarah, embarrassed, a little afraid now, says, "I didn't laugh." "Oh yes you did," the stranger—God—says. "I heard you laugh."

Fast forward: Surprise. Sarah conceives, has a child, a son. They name him Isaac, which means "laughter." Sarah laughs again. It's a different laughter now—laughter at the surprising, unpredictable, unlikely grace of God. She says, "God has brought laughter for me."

Distinguished Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says this is the elemental Bible story because it is about the elemental Judeo-Christian notion of God. God, not as an abstraction, not as a remote power off somewhere in the sky, but as a presence: a God who shows up in the barren lives of two old people, shows up with the promise of life and hope. The overwhelming and always relevant question here—"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"—is at the heart of what it means to have faith.

If the answer to the question is “Yes, some things are too difficult for God,” then God is not God, and we have decided to live in a closed universe where everything is stable, reliable, and hopeless and where the end of the story is death.

If the answer is “No, nothing is too wonderful for God: nothing is impossible for God,” you have taken the leap of faith and decided to live in a world full of possibility, hopefulness, a world full of life, a world full of surprises.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is a story of two people, parents of us all, moving from hopelessness to hope, from despair and resignation to possibility, from barrenness to productivity, from death to life.

Faith in this God is not predictable. Faith is an openness to the startling, amazing, surprising grace of God coming at us, to us, in the most unlikely and unexpected of ways.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, faith is not about knowing everything there is to know about God. It is knowing that there is plenty about God that we don’t know. Faith is not certainty. Faith is acknowledging that God will not be reduced to the limits of human understanding. God will be God, and there will always be surprises. “God will make a way where there is no way,” Martin Luther King Jr. used to say. God will make a way through the sea. God will bring freedom out of oppression, justice out of injustice, life out of death. It’s not that God will do everything we ask, give us whatever we think we want, as the prosperity gospel preachers promise. It is that God is God and God will do God’s will and it will be a surprise when it happens.

The scientists know that discovery grows out of humility and openness to surprise. The enemy of science is certainty—the sense that there are no surprises, no mystery, that we know everything there is to know. But you and I are resistant to surprise and far prefer predictability.

I love something Edmund Steimle said on the subject. Steimle was a great preacher and teacher of preaching in the last generation. Commenting on the text “God’s mercies are new every morning,” he said, “At my age, the promise of newness every morning is at best a mixed blessing. I have come to the point in my life when I don’t want anything new in the morning. I want my slippers right beneath my bed where I left them the night before. I want my orange juice and bran flakes for breakfast as normal. At my age, I can do without a lot of newness, especially in the morning” (see Tom Long, in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2001).

The Bible is full of surprises from beginning to end. An old couple having a child. The old promise renewed. A God who time and time again comes to his people when they have given up, when they’ve concluded that God has

forgotten them—if God even exists in the first place. A God who comes particularly when their backs are against the wall and their hearts are full of fear. A God who comes quietly, steadily, to be with them, to bind up their wounds, to strengthen their hearts and arms and legs, a God for whom nothing is too wonderful.

Christianity is about a God of surprises. What, after all, could be more surprising than God coming into the world in the birth of a child, another child, this child born of humble parents in an insignificant village called Bethlehem? What could be more surprising than that?

W. H. Auden, the great poet, captures it in his *Christmas Oratorio*, "For the Time Being." At the manger, the shepherds say —

> We never left the place where we were born . . .
> walked thousands of miles, but only wore the grass between work and home.
> But . . . music and sudden light
> have interrupted our routine tonight,
> and swept the filth of habit from our hearts.
> O here and now our endless journey starts
> ("For the Time Being," W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, p. 294)

What could be more surprising than the incarnation, God coming to us in that child? Only one thing actually: that child becoming a man and teaching so amazingly and clearly, healing so lovingly, reaching out to the marginalized so graciously, dying so courageously, and then, the greatest surprise of all, defeating death on Easter.

Episcopal priest and popular author Fleming Rutledge says that she looks forward to Easter more keenly as she gets older because "there isn't anything we can do about death. It is so damned inexorable and I do mean damned. We feel its presence as a hostile, invading power" (*Help My Unbelief*, pp. 196–199).

That's exactly how Abraham and Sarah felt: two old people at the end of their lives and God coming to them with hope and possibility and life. What a surprise.

An old friend of mine, Bob Hudnut, wrote a book years ago when he was a new minister. It's out of date, but I still like it, and I pulled it off the shelf because of its title: *Surprised by God*.

He tells about the ways he experienced God coming into the daily routine, the humdrum busyness, the bone-tired weariness of a busy new minister in his first church. In the last paragraph he wrote,

> I think of the coffin on rollers and freshly dug dirt and the six little chairs. I think of the young woman with laughter tumulting from her lips as she talks with her husband to be. I think of the little boy in an oxygen tent with his teddy bear at the foot of the bed. I think of the mother smiling the smile of first mothers as she tells of the birth of her child.
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> And I think of myself and my being there, and of God's coming somehow out of the nowhere into the now. (*Surprised by God*, Robert Hudnut, p. 127)

She sat quietly in my office on Tuesday afternoon, two days before major surgery, a bright blue scarf on her head because of the chemotherapy. She didn't put her head in her hands and say "Why me?" although she had every reason in the world to say that. What she said was surprising: "I wouldn't trade this for anything: all the love and support. God has never been more real for me."

A God of beautiful surprises, who makes a way where there is no way; a God who, precisely when we are afraid, literally scared to death, resigned and without hope, comes with new possibility; a God so surprising that death itself becomes the occasion for new life; a God for whom nothing is too wonderful.

Amen.